

The Industrial City: The Multi-Ethnic Frontier of the Twentieth Century

La ciudad industrial: la frontera multiétnica del siglo XX

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ABSTRACT

Between 1890 and 1920, big American industrial cities represented the frontier for the more than 23 million immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, and Central America, as well as for the African-Americans from the South. The development of mass consumption industries and the interventionism of the federal government provided security at the workplace and a general improvement in living standards for blue collar workers. The local party machines, the industrial unions and the effects of the First World War fully integrated the new immigrants into politics. Mass culture and entertainment made Americanization easier and, together with organised crime, were a quick way of social ascent.

Key words: United States, urban frontier, immigration, new capitalism, mass culture, crime.

RESUMEN

Entre 1890 y 1920, las grandes ciudades industriales de Estados Unidos, representaron la «frontera» para más de 23 millones de emigrantes del sur y este de Europa, Asia, y América Central, así como para los afroamericanos de los estados del Sur. El desarrollo de las industrias de consumo de masas y la creciente intervención del gobierno federal les permitió alcanzar niveles desconocidos de estabilidad laboral y bienestar. Las organizaciones de los partidos políticos en las ciudades, los sindicatos industriales y la Primera Guerra Mundial facilitaron su plena incorporación a la política. El ocio y la cultura de masas les hicieron más fácil la americanización y, junto con el gangsterismo, eran también una forma rápida de ascensión social.

Palabras clave: Estados Unidos, frontera urbana, inmigración, nuevo capitalismo, cultura de masas, crimen.

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1. INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE «FRONTIER THESIS»

In 1893, in his famous essay «The Significance of the Frontier in American History», historian Frederick Jackson Turner pointed out that the existence of free lands in the west was the fastest and most efficient route to Americanisation, developing federal institutions and encouraging the growth of nationalism as opposed to localism and sectionalism, and above all, the frontier promoted democracy both in the U.S.A. and in Europe.¹ Written at the depths of the economic depression of the 1890s, this was a genuinely American interpretation of national history and identity, as well as an attempt to explain the most serious crisis that the American Republic had suffered until then. He argued that U.S. history was conditioned not by the European inheritance of the east coast but by the conquest of the west and the existence of a frontier. Thus, the end of free lands, officially announced in 1890, sharpened the economic, political and social crisis through which the country was living, as well as the uncertainty about the Republic's future.

Until then amateurism and conservatism had dominated American historiography. Between 1870 and 1890, F. J. Turner, Charles A. Beard, V.L. Parrington and other progressive historians undertook history's professionalization and expansion as an academic discipline in North American universities. Theirs was a scientific history, related to the new social sciences². It was also a critical, democratic and progressive history within the intellectual orbit of the political reformism of the first third of the twentieth century. The «frontier thesis» was not a political history, based on great protagonists, but a historical explanation much influenced by social-Darwinist evolutionary theory which accorded a determining importance to the geographical environment, to regional differences and conflicts as well as to demographic and economic aspects.

In the midst of the populist revolt which brought together millions of farmers from the south and west that had been ruined by the agricultural crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, and the confrontation between east and west – gold and silver – in the 1896 elections, the «frontier thesis» gave a simple explanation of American history which linked these farmers and their hopes to Thomas Jefferson's and Andrew Jackson's republican vision of the extension of democracy and the Republic's commitment to egalitarian access to land ownership. As a result of his work, Turner, a professor at Wisconsin and Harvard, dominated American historiography until the great depression of the 1930s and influenced, directly or indirectly, all the ideologues and politicians of the times, including the progressive presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who tried to explain and resolve the turn of the century crisis.

All agreed with Turner that the closure of the west in 1890 had aggravated the social effects of the economic crisis, but they did not agree in their solutions to that

¹ TURNER, 1893, in TAYLOR, 1956, pp. 14-15.

² HOFSTADTER, 1968, pp. 3-43.

crisis. While Turner believed that the answer lay not in seeking new frontier territories but in more intensive federal government action to ensure the population's welfare and preserve democratic ideals³, others like Theodore Roosevelt used Turner's work to justify the start of a more aggressive foreign policy to lay the basis of an empire beyond the American continental confines⁴.

Turner's explanation of American history, based on the frontier and regional and territorial conflict could not, however, explain the changes undergone by American society between 1890 and 1920. This was because socially the country had become ever more urban and the large industrial cities which had grown up attracted a new type of immigrant from Europe's southern and eastern borders, as well as from Central America. These immigrants bore little or no resemblance to the northern European Protestants who had populated the earlier nineteenth-century frontier. In this rapidly transformed situation, both in the industrialized urban and rural settings, and in the eastern as well as the western states, social conflict was influenced by the attraction of the anti-capitalism of the American Socialist Party (1902) or the the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, 1905). In the south, meanwhile, racism and segregation were the legacies of slavery.

It was not long before Turner's historical explanation came under critical fire. At the end of the 1930s, George W. Pierson, who was much influenced by the history of ideas which the conflicting ideologies of fascism and marxism had sharpened, criticized Turner for his «defective methodology, lack of precision, exaggeration and paucity of exact definitions.» He also criticized Turner for not having demonstrated the manner in which the short pioneering experience had been capable of changing a whole civilization⁵. Above all, however, the major criticisms of Turner arose from the contrast between his explanation of U.S. history and the reality of the depression and World War II. A generation of historians from the large cities' ethnic minorities, who were much influenced by marxism and the analysis of class conflict, challenged Turner's intellectual isolationism, his trumpeting of individualism, and his pessimism about the future of the U.S. after the closure of the frontier's free land, at a time when the country needed to bend all its efforts to the struggle against the depression⁶.

In the 1930s, Benjamin F. Wright was another critic who argued that the existence of free land had not always led to democracy; it was rather the institutions, ideas and customs which the pioneers had taken with them that had permitted the evolution to democracy. Many of these political ideas had originated in England, and initially the democratic reforms of the Eastern states were more important than those of the West⁷. Prior to World War II, Fred A. Shannon added another critical voice by questioning whether the frontier could have served as an escape valve after the civil

³ TURNER, 1948, pp. 300, 332-333.

⁴ LAFEBER, 1993, pp. 78, 82-93, 176-178. HOFSTADTER, 1992, pp. 172, 175, 176-178.

⁵ PIERSON, 1977, pp. 31-40.

⁶ HOFSTADTER, 1968, pp. 92-93.

⁷ WRIGHT, 1977, pp. 63-68.

war, since wage workers and poor eastern farmers were unable to migrate to the frontier⁸. Going beyond these criticisms, Richard Hofstadter argued in 1968 that the West's opening was but one more phase in American capitalist development, and that rather than a wild and primitive pioneers' space, the West was an urban territory where the pioneers were petty capitalists who wanted to export their agricultural production and who co-existed with speculators, and large mining and railroad entrepreneurs, sharing the conflicts and inequalities of other North American regions and the Old World⁹.

Although at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the following decade, some aspects of Turner's thesis, like the west's symbology¹⁰ or its role as a «safety valve», were revised, since the 1960s and 1970s the new historians of the west, who have been influenced by social history, have incorporated into their work gender studies and non-European minorities¹¹. The west was not an empty space: it was inhabited by Native Americans, Mexicans and the descendants of Spaniards. Colonization and conquest by U.S. settlers was not a glorious achievement over a wild and empty countryside, but was marked by the extermination of native peoples and the destruction of the natural environment. Nor was it the work solely of white pioneers of European origin, but also of Mexican and Asian men and women who formed the lowest social orders. The West was not a model of democracy: many territories, like California, when they became states, forbade slavery, but deprived negroes and «coloured persons» of the vote; and Kansas tried to prevent them from entering the new state altogether.

At the end of his life, Turner wanted to add new concepts to his historical analysis, and in 1925 admitted that a «reinterpretation of our urban history» was needed¹². The aim of this essay is precisely to provide an interpretation of the cities' role as a frontier for the ethnic minorities of southern and eastern Europe, for Asians, Central Americans and African-Americans. Cities were already the major destination for European immigrants between 1830 and 1880, and the western frontier was above all urban. After the closure of the frontier in 1890, the large industrial and multi-ethnic cities were as much a route to Americanisation as to social and political advancement, both for the millions of immigrants arriving between 1890 and 1920 and for the African-Americans of the south, who began their great migration north in the 1890s. In the large cities of the north, midwest and west, recent immigrants enjoyed advancements typical of a developed industrialized society, based increasingly on mass consumer industries, and the benefits of a stronger federal government, transformed during the Progressive Era and especially since the First World War. They took advantage of new possibilities for social ascent offered by leisure and mass culture from the 1920s onwards, as well as opportunities in the criminal world brought about by prohibition.

⁸ SHANNON, 1977, pp. 41-50.

⁹ HOFSTADTER, 1968, pp. 159-160.

¹⁰ SMITH, 1978, *passim*.

¹¹ BOGUE, 1996, pp. 12-14

¹² Quoted by HOFSTADTER, 1977, p. 106.

2. CITIES ON THE LAST FRONTIER

After the passing of the *Homestead Act* in 1862 and the establishment of a land distribution policy defined and guaranteed by the federal government, the possibility of access to free land succeeded in attracting hundreds of thousands of immigrants to the west. Nonetheless, it was the cities that, between 1862 and 1921, attracted the majority of the 32 million new inhabitants in the U.S.A. One of the ambitious official aims of the Homestead Act was egalitarian access to property¹³, but the land distribution and colonisation of the last agrarian western frontier, the Great Plains, succeeded in settling only two million farmers (Americans and European immigrants) on 372.659 family farmsteads¹⁴. The costs of getting settled, which amounted to about 1.000 dollars, and above all the climate of the Great Plains, were the principal causes of this relative failure.

The Homestead Act, passed during the Civil War by an exclusively Republican Congress, guaranteed 160 acres of public land to citizens and non-citizens, who would cultivate and live off it. The sizes of the land plots were appropriate to the lands in the northeast and the prairies to the west of the Mississippi, where land was fertile and the rain adequate, but without the necessary rain and irrigation the Great Plains turned out to be an unsuitable environment for the maintenance of a family on 160 acres of land. Geographers had already pointed out that there was a climatic frontier around the 100th meridian, separating the prairies from the Great Plains, where the average rainfall was half of that of the Mississippi Valley. This frontier could also be seen in the landscape; if in the prairies, the tall grass interrupted by rows of trees along the water courses prevailed, in the Great Plains both completely disappeared. This vast territory, obtained thanks to the extinction of the bison and the extermination of the Indian nations, began to be occupied by colonists at the start of the 1880s, coinciding with one of the humid cycles of the region. In these conditions, the Great Plains were an inhospitable environment, but seemed appropriate for the cultivation of cereals, which fostered the idea among farmers and the federal government that crop cultivation could change the climate. However when, after 1889, the rains failed and the drought lasted until 1896, many farmers had to sell their lands to large scale landowners or ranchmen, and abandon the plains¹⁵.

It was, then, the cities which attracted and kept the largest number of national and foreign migrants from the end of the Civil War to the 1890s, and then on until the nineteen twenties. The process of urbanization that had begun in the United States after 1830, accelerated after the Civil War and by 1890 had transformed the USA into one of the most urbanized countries in the Atlantic world after Great Britain, Holland, Belgium and Germany. This urban growth affected the entire country and not just the cities of the east. Saint Louis flourished in the Midwest and later Chicago; a large part of western colonization was urban, as was demonstrated by the growth of Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Omaha, Kansas City, Denver, San

¹³ For the political significance of *The Homestead Act*, see SMITH, 1978, pp. 165-173.

¹⁴ WHITE, 1993, pp. 143-145.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 227-231.

Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle; and in the south were Durham, Birmingham and Houston. Many of these cities were industrial centres, with high multiethnic immigration, which obliged them to become suppliers of new services. This was a new stage in American urbanization, which continued until 1930¹⁶.

3. THE MULTIETHNIC INDUSTRIAL CITY

American urban growth was characterised not only by its speed, but also by the fact that most of the cities were totally new, and were designed to make use of mass transport such as rail, tram, underground, cars, and from 1889 onwards, fundamental inventions such as the lift. Because of their recent origins and the fact that cities had enormous powers up to the New Deal (they were legally public companies, whose activities were limited only by the imagination of their politicians)¹⁷, their physiognomy was different from that of European cities. These were cities with central commerce and business districts dominated by massive skyscrapers, with residential suburbs to which the middle-classes began moving, whereas the growing immigrant worker population formed ethnic ghettos in the city centres. These areas went into decline and became increasingly dangerous as the middle-classes moved out.

More than any other big city, Chicago represented the great urban growth of the post-Civil War years. On the shores of Lake Michigan, near the source of the Mississippi River, in the early 19th century it was a simple military enclave with trading in animal hides. It became the door to the west thanks to the construction in 1848 of the Michigan-Illinois Canal, which connected the Great Lakes with the Mississippi River, and the opening in 1852 of the first railroads, which connected east to west. This main railway junction attracted all kinds of economic activities and so Chicago became an industrial city, with agricultural and extractive companies related to the development of its hinterland, such as grain storage in silos, sawmills, and meat industries. A secondary and varied manufacturing sector also began to develop, based on the production of agricultural machinery and tools¹⁸.

The city landscape changed with its economic development and the growth of its population, particularly after the great fire of 1871. What rose from the ashes was the prototype of the modern city. Skyscrapers appeared in the commercial city centre, a way of using space to a maximum in the face of land speculation; for the first time the affluent classes moved out to the suburbs, an ideal set-up in which the children could play without danger and the middle-classes could escape the misery and danger of the city; and between the business districts and the suburbs were the ethnic neighbourhoods and the smoky factories¹⁹.

¹⁶ MONKKONEN, 1990, pp. 69-83.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁸ LAMAR, 1998, pp.195-196.

¹⁹ CRONON, 1992, p. 347.

In 1890 this new Chicago became the USA's second city after New York, and in 1893 it was the backdrop to the World Fair, which was celebrating the fourth centenary of Columbus' «discovery» of America. This universal exhibition meant not only the recognition of Chicago as a great city in the United States and the world, but the presentation of Chicago as the expression of modernity. The visitors who came in large numbers from many places voiced a combination of contradictory impressions of the city, and that they associated with modernity: factories which covered the city in a dark foul-smelling cloud, amazing skyscrapers in the city centre, crowded slums, tranquil suburbs, a confusion reminiscent of the tower of Babel... «humdrum noise and confusion existed all day and all night»²⁰.

Chicago doubled its population in the 1880s, going from 503.000 inhabitants to 1.100.000. Other cities in the USA and in the rest of the world such as New York, Toronto, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin, and Hamburg grew on a similar scale but a little more slowly. The huge growth of the cities between 1880 and 1920 was fuelled by the great national, international and transatlantic migrations, brought on by rapid demographic increase, the crisis in family farming and the incapacity in the regions of origin to absorb any more of the workforce in their industrial and service sectors²¹. What was new was the increase in transatlantic immigration due to cheaper transport costs, the speed at which news travelled thanks to the mass media, and expectations of a quick rise in living standards. All these factors transformed the recipient cities into multiethnic cities.

A large part of this transatlantic migration was to the American continent and within it the greatest proportion and the most diverse went to the United States, although unlike Brazil and Argentina the federal government did not subsidize the journey, nor did it offer immediate naturalization, nor did it take an active part in recruiting immigrants²². In this way between 1880 and 1921, around 23.500.000 people emigrated to the USA: 3 million in the 1870s, 5 million in the 1880s, 3,5 million in the 1890s and 8,8 million between 1900 and 1910. The choice of the USA was based on a combination of better economic opportunities, the attraction of a liberal-democratic political system with high public participation and independent judiciary, reasonably democratic naturalization laws, and religious tolerance. But, above all the United States had a higher capacity to absorb immigrants and a long tradition of mass migrations. The size of the country, its huge resources, and its development since the Civil War, required people to colonize its last frontier, and especially a cheap unskilled workforce for its potential industry²³. In this way, after passing through immigration control on New York's Ellis Island, Angel Island in San Francisco, or Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia, Galvestone or New Orleans, most newcomers went on to the large cities in the east, midwest and northeast,

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 350.

²¹ NUGENT, 1995, p. 163. The same argument that the economic circumstances of the country of origin are essential to the motives for emigration, is central to the book by BODNAR, 1987, pp. 55-56.

²² NUGENT, 1995, pp. 151-155.

²³ The need for a workforce had led to the passing in Congress in 1864 of The Law of Job Contracts, through which the federal government permitted the contracting of foreign workers, as long as the companies paid for the journey.

everywhere except to the south, following migratory chains of families and friends already established. These played a determining role as to which ethnic groups cornered what jobs, as well as defining the neighbourhoods and social relations within the ethnic circle. Once their destination was reached, opportunities were waiting: the railways and the government still had land to sell until 1914, wages in factories, mines and the railways were higher than European ones and the cost of living was the same or lower.

The main characteristic of this new transatlantic immigration is that it was no longer dominated by the British, Germans or Scandinavians, but by millions of Jews, Catholics and Orthodox Christians from different southern and eastern European countries, who spoke no English and came from areas which were politically and economically less advanced than western or central Europe. On the other hand the west coast saw an increase in hundreds of thousands of Japanese and Chinese immigrants, while thousands of Mexicans began to temporarily cross the border in search of work.

On top of this, the early 1900s saw the beginning of the large-scale migration of African-Americans from the southern states to the cities of the northeast and midwest, especially Chicago, in search of better wages and more egalitarian political and social treatment. Mass migration was a way of escaping the progressive suppression of political rights, white supremacy, and the increase in racial violence in the south during the Progressive Era. Between 1900 and 1910, 200.000 African-Americans left the south, and during the First World War another 450.000 did so, commencing the great migration, which by the middle of the twentieth century had seen the majority of African-Americans leave the south, making race relations a national issue.

The recipient cities of this immigration became multiethnic and multiracial, with a cosmopolitan population and a multitude of new problems to resolve. In many cases the cities did not live up to the expectations of the new arrivals. European immigrants were crowded into slums, with rates of disease and loss of life appropriate to underdeveloped countries, as a consequence of which the reform of the cities became the main objective of the progressive reformers. In general their expectations of social mobility were not fulfilled in their lifetimes. There was, as in the west, much horizontal mobility in search of work, those who had prior qualifications did prosper and they settled in cities in the west or midwest, where the social hierarchy was less established than in eastern cities. Some became the shopkeepers and saloon owners who served their own ethnic community, but mainly the recent immigrants and the following generation, although they did progress, held the same manual blue-collar jobs²⁴. As for the African-Americans from the south, in the cities of the north and midwest they found poor neighbourhoods, badly-paid jobs, racial prejudice and violence amongst white people, especially the already established white minorities. The Irish had the advantage over foreign immigrants and African-Americans of speaking English and being white American citizens, and consequently

²⁴ BODNAR, 1987, pp. 169-175.

they feared the arrival of the newest migrants because they competed with them for jobs, living quarters and in their political allegiances²⁵. However in the first third of the twentieth century, and especially after the First World War, the large cities also offered massive possibilities of social ascent for an industrialized society in the process of rapid change, by means of political action and trade unionism, consumerism, culture and mass entertainment, and crime.

4. POLITICAL ACTION AND TRADE UNIONISM

In this way the cities became suppliers of services, adapting organizationally and politically to respond to new challenges. The results were the local party machines, which constituted the biggest political innovation of the Gilded Era. In all the major cities party leaders campaigned in the traditional way, against a new backdrop of urban misery and overcrowding; but because of their local, parochial and tribal way of seeing things they gained some very loyal voters amongst the immigrants. Due to the government's non-provision of services to the cities, the party machines extended local government powers to cover all kinds of services and social benefits, which led to favours and patronage and therefore corruption within. However, the party machines gave rise to the emergence of the plebeian politician, who unlike the patrician elite, needed to profit from his work.

Through the supplying of services, the party machines were able to attract the votes of the newly arrived and break the tight political competition between parties and the immobility of the vote since the Civil War. Local politics, via the party machines, allowed the newly arrived immigrants to integrate politically and climb socially. Those that had arrived first, the Irish, controlled the majority of the party machines in the big cities, whereas each district of the city was run by the middle class of whichever ethnic group they wanted to win over, functioning as interclass organizations defined on ethnic lines. Their grass-roots organizations were the neighbourhoods themselves and their political action consisted of sharing out public employment among the city's different ethnic groups and public services among the different neighbourhoods.

Between 1880 and the First World War almost 80% of the 30 largest cities in the United States had local governments dominated by these political party machines, but in most cases they did not hold on to power for more than one or two mandates. On the other hand, reference is always made to the Democratic party's organization in New York (Tammany Hall) or in Chicago, but it was in the relatively small or medium-sized towns that the party machines were most persistent²⁶. In the large multiethnic cities, social diversity tended to break up the machines and allow fundamental changes in the electoral system, such as the one which began in the 1920s and crystallized into the New Deal.

²⁵ TUTTLE, 1977, pp. 112, 151-142, 181-183, 184-207

²⁶ MONKKONEN, 1990, pp. 209-210.

The First World War transformed municipal politics, just as it did many aspects of American society. In the first place, during the war the progressive reformists were able to implement their most radical programme of government intervention in the economy and in welfare, focusing especially on combating corruption in American cities. On the other hand, after the war, nativist desires to restrict immigration triumphed for the first time, so that the immigration laws of 1921 and 1924, by making European temporary migration impossible, paradoxically obliged ethnic minorities from southern and eastern Europe to either remain in the United States and assimilate or renounce immigration²⁷. This resulted in the rapid granting of citizenship to those deciding to stay in the country, so that in the 1930s, without having recourse to party machines, the most recent immigrants were voting citizens with full rights, courted by both parties as decisive election-winning votes.

The new political weight of the ethnic minorities was reflected in the growing number of politicians of foreign backgrounds who attained public office in the interwar period, such as the mayors of New York, Fiorello La Guardia (Jewish-Italian), and of Chicago, Anton Cermak (Czech); the governors of Massachusetts, James Michael Curley, (Irish) and New York, Al Smith (Irish); congressman for Minnesota Andrew Volstead (Norwegian); and the senators for Rhode Island, Felix Hebert (French Canadian) and New Mexico, Dennis Chavez, (Mexican); as well as union leaders Luisa Moreno (Guatemalan) and Rosa Pesota (Italian).

In the 1928 presidential elections, the Democratic candidate was the ex-governor of New York, Al Smith, a Catholic of Irish origin, who hoped to reach the presidency with an electoral programme in which the suppression of prohibition was a central issue, in the face of the moral rigidity represented by Herbert Hoover. The electoral support from the cosmopolitan cities did not succeed in 1928, but in the middle of the thirties' depression, it would be decisive for the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, and especially in 1936²⁸. The Americanisation of this social sector was to be completed, during the depression, by the massive affiliation of second generation immigrants, mainly semi-skilled or unskilled workers, to the unions of the CIO, when it was constituted in 1935. The process was completed through participation in the Second World War.

5. NEW CAPITALISM AND MASS CONSUMERISM

This process of Americanisation of recent immigrants ran parallel in the 1920s to the consolidation of a «new capitalism», based on the industries of mass consumption. In fact, after overcoming the post-war crisis, between 1923 and 1929 the American industrial system experienced a qualitative and quantitative growth,

²⁷ What was decisive was the suppression of the re-emigration factor which had affected 1/3 of immigrants since 1899. In HOERDER, 1982, pp. 28-41.

²⁸ In the 1936 elections, 6 million new voters were registered, of which 5/6 supported Roosevelt. Among them were all the ethnic minorities, including Norwegians and Swedes, who abandoned their traditional support for the Republicans. See BARKAN, 1996, p. 43.

which extended prosperity to large sectors of the working classes and seemed to keep at bay cyclical crises and unemployment. In the 1920s, this new capitalism experienced an unprecedented peak in the leading industries of the economy; electrical, chemical, machinery, rubber; communications (telephone, telegraph); mass entertainment (radio and cinema), and those related to new methods of transport, such as the automobile and aeronautical industries. Many of these industries, concentrated in the Great Lakes region, in cities such as Cleveland, Detroit or Chicago, by applying new technologies and starting from the principle of scientific management, were able to achieve very high productivity levels, which enabled them to extend «welfare capitalism» to their labour force.

Although there is a firm historiographical consensus which considers «welfare capitalism» to be a strategy by management and company directors in order to debilitate the unions, after the wave of strikes in 1919²⁹, it can also be seen as an attempt to find harmony between management and work, extending security and prosperity to the workforce. Working on the principle, proven in the First World War, that the well-being of the worker increased productivity, labour began to be considered as «a definitive investment», in which the uncertainty of unemployment and sickness must be avoided. Thus many companies established different welfare plans, which helped workers to buy a house or shares in the company, and protected them and their families with insurance against illness, accident, old age and death. The companies also improved safety conditions and services for workers, introducing such improvements as medical care and cafeterias, as well as facilitating leisure activities by encouraging company sports teams or handing out allotments for gardening activities³⁰.

On top of this, salaries rose by around 15% whereas prices remained stable. These wage increases were not proportional to the rise in productivity, nor as great as the wage increases during the war, but what was extraordinary was the general improvement in living standards in the 1920s, thanks to new consumer hardware products, which revolutionised domestic life for large sectors of the working classes. In this way electricity, central heating, and bathrooms gave a new sensation of comfort to American homes; household appliances made daily life easier, while the radio, the phonograph, and the automobile gave a feeling of prosperity previously unknown to the North American worker, making life radically different from that in 1900. In addition, one cannot forget the improvement of free social services, such as the spread of secondary education, the proliferation of public libraries and the attractive new life of the cities with their cinemas, theatres and collective leisure zones³¹.

Detroit, like the other cities of the midwest, symbolized the triumph of mechanization as much as that of the vibrant urban life of the twenties. The city

²⁹ Selig Perlman, an economist of the «Wisconsin School», argued in 1928 that «Welfare Capitalism» attempted to reduce union power in companies, showing that trade-unionism acted against the interests of both company and non-union worker, and that the only natural solidarity was that which united all the workers in the same company, be they management or workers. See PERLMAN, 1970, pp. 209-210.

³⁰ BRODY, 1980, pp. 49-55.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 62-64.

was the centre of the automobile industry and its factories attracted both whites from the Appalachians and blacks from the deep south as well as immigrants from Mexico. The assembly-line work burnt out many workers and the bosses blacklisted any worker suspected of union activities. But in general, if the workers were not happy they could change jobs and with their salaries they could buy themselves model T Fords, start to buy their own homes and experience the luxury of indoor plumbing³².

For some immigrants, achieving citizenship and voting rights, higher wages and a better standard of living, access to mass consumerism and state education was not attractive enough. They were looking to gain in social status and get rich quickly. Possibilities lay in entertainment, spectator sports or crime. Many immigrants began their careers in the world of entertainment in ethnic theatres, continuing in vaudeville and becoming stars of the stage and screen. These included Al Johnson, Fanny Bryce, Danny Kaye, Jack Benny and Bob Hope, as well as Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and Mary Pickford. Spectator sports were both a means to social ascent and Americanisation. It is no coincidence that between the wars, Jewish sportsmen were at their peak and the worlds of boxing, American football, baseball and basketball were peopled by Irish, Jews, Lithuanians and Poles. In basketball, which was extremely popular amongst ethnic groups, in the period 1937-38, 45 of the 90 players in the professional league were Jewish, but there were also teams made up of Germans (Buffalo Germans), and Irish (Brooklyn Visitations), as well as Championships of Lithuanians and Polish Catholics. Similarly, Hollywood had a high proportion of foreign actors, directors and producers.

6. GANGSTERS AND PROHIBITION

For some Irish, Jewish, Italian and other ethnic minorities recently emigrated to the United States, crime seemed the only means of rapid ascent and the youngest found the ideal opportunity in the prohibition years. Many of those who revolutionized the criminal world between 1920 and 1930 were southern Italians or Sicilians. They had either been born in the United States or had arrived as children between 1890 and 1914, growing up in the slums of big cities such as New York, at a period in which material wealth was of primary importance, and where education was becoming a necessary qualification in the job market, both public and private. These young people suffered intense discrimination for being Italian, found it difficult to adapt to school discipline, to understand the middle-class English in which they were being taught, or to grasp the future rewards which education might bring. They wanted immediate success and wealth, in order to escape the limitations of their neighbourhoods. They all left their studies as soon as they could, aged 14, and joined the «corner gangs», so as to get «money, good-looking women and silk underwear»³³.

³² GOLDBERG, 1999, pp.199

³³ Attributed to Lucky Luciano, quoted by NELLI, 1976, p.106.

One of these New York corner gangs was the Five Points Gang, (whose history has been recently recreated by Scorsese in *Gangs in New York*), led by Antonio Vacarelli, who took the name of Paul Kelly. Kelly, allied to other gangs, gave orders to 1.500 youths, mainly Italians, but also Jews, Irish and other minorities, who controlled the area between the Bowery and Broadway, Fourteenth Street and City Hall Park. Among these youths were Lucky Luciano, Al Capone and John Torrio. Their activities covered the more traditional ones such as theft, gambling, prostitution and forgery, and the other new and more lucrative drug trafficking and «labour racketeering»³⁴. Kelly, like others in Chicago, went from offering his services to the construction-workers' unions to defend them from their employers' gunmen, to actually running the New York construction-workers' unions and using strike threats as a means of extortion against the property owners and real estate agents of the Upper East Side. He was able to enjoy similar profits by controlling the New York docks, becoming vice-president of the International Longshoremen's Association, a member of the American Federation of Labor³⁵.

The big opportunity for the rapid ascent of young gangsters like Al Capone, John Torrio, or Lucky Luciano, was prohibition. From 1900 onwards, when alcohol consumption rose again in the United States, it was associated with immigration and crime. In contrast to the cultural values of middle-class Americans, who wanted the federal authorities to prohibit the production and trade of alcohol and thus maintain «typically American values», the immigrant working class, now the majority in the big cities such as New York or Chicago, had an alternative working-class culture in which urban saloons and the male passtime of drinking were symbols of autonomy and community cohesion. Beer and the urban saloon were the main objectives of the reformers. Since the early twentieth century beer had become the main alcoholic beverage due to immigration and urban growth. Saloons proliferated in the large cities, controlled by the beer breweries, but often managed by landlords from the immigrant working classes. Not only did these urban saloons provide the possibility of social ascent for ethnic minorities, but they were also the «poor man's club». The saloons were closely linked to the corrupt political practices of local party machines, and they were frequented by a criminal underclass whose prostitution or gambling activities were allowed on the premises.

Therefore from the early twentieth century, the struggle to illegalise the production and trade of alcohol, led by the Anti-Saloon League of America (ASLA), was a city issue and a preoccupation of the urban middle-classes, who wanted to rescue the immigrant working classes from vice, poverty and political corruption. The first prohibitionist measures affected the cities. In Denver, Spokane and Des Moines, where prohibition had been implemented, it seemed that all the social problems decreased. Other towns declared middle-class districts as «no licence» zones, but this was not enough for the reformers, because the saloons persisted in

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp.107-108.

³⁵ For the relation between unions and organized crime see ADAMIC, 1984, pp.186-193.

the town centres, tempting the working classes. Nor was it enough that, before the United States became involved in the First World War in April 1917, prohibition had triumphed in 19 states. An amendment to the Federal Constitution had to be obtained.

Amendment 18, ratified on 16th January 1920, banned both trading in and public consumption of alcohol. It thus made illegal the saloon business and anything related to the production and selling of alcohol. This was ideal for the rapid rise of young immigrants who transformed the criminal world, dividing up the national territory between rival bands and giving the criminal world an oligopolistic structure. Among them were members of all the ethnic minorities, but above all Italians, Irish and Jews stood out, who in connivance with the police, judiciary, local politicians, and other public powers were able to control cities and even states. Frank Costello, Lucky Lucciano and Meyer Lansky controlled New York; Frank Lilano and Moe Dalitz, Cleveland; Hyman Abrams and King Salomon, Boston; Daniel Walsh, Providence; «Boo Boo» Hoff, Philadelphia; John Lazia, Kansas City; Al Capone and Johnny Torrio controlled Chicago, Cook County and the state of Illinois. The rise of Al Capone, from the slums of Brooklyn to the status of public enemy number One in 1929, was particularly spectacular. He earned more than 60 million dollars a year trafficking in alcohol and was converted by the press into a mythical and popular hero³⁶.

The big business which prohibition implied tempted many respectable citizens, who saw an easy way to get rich quickly. The Volstead Law, which applied the prohibitionist amendment, was very strict, but federal and state resources for applying the law were scant and the agents of the Prohibition Bureau were often corrupt, accepting all kinds of bribes from illegal traffickers and clandestine bars. Corruption reached as far as Congress and even senior officials of the Harding administration, such as Attorney-General Harry Doherty. These circumstances explain cases such as that of George Remus. Born in Berlin, emigrating to the United States with his parents as a child, settling first in Milwaukee and later in Chicago, Remus, as a graduate in pharmacology and optometry, earned his living as the owner of two drugstores, whilst studying law by night. At age 24 he began to work as a criminal lawyer, having amongst his clients gangsters like Johnny Torrio. From this respectable position as a lawyer and family man, he thought that with his legal and pharmacological background he could make a fortune from prohibition. So he moved to Cincinnati, the centre of the country's main whisky distilleries, and he bought them at a bargain price, becoming the biggest distillery owner in the United States. The next step was to get a licence to produce and sell medicinal whisky, the majority of which went into contraband. His career was meteoric and at its height he had 3.000 employees occupied in the production and distribution of liquor³⁷.

³⁶ SINCLAIR, 1970, p. 9

³⁷ BEHR, 1998, pp. 95-101.

7. AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ADVANCEMENT

Although the cities offered all these forms of social ascent, blacks appeared to be excluded. Almost half a million blacks migrated from the rural south to Chicago, New York and Detroit, thanks to the demand for labour during the First World War. Another 400.000 enlisted in the army, 200.000 were sent to France and 42.000 went into combat. Behind the decision to emigrate or to enlist was the desire to flee from the misery and segregation of the South and experience the status of full citizenship. Some progress was achieved, (in Chicago the black minority obtained three black councillors during the war), but in most of the cities the black minorities did not obtain the political benefits which other ethnic minorities gained by supporting a particular candidate.

Although black immigration to New York had not been as high as in Cleveland, Detroit or Chicago, thanks to that city's ethnic diversity and the concentration of black people in Harlem, race riots were avoided between 1916 and 1930, and the Klan was unable to get a foothold. For these reasons, the city of New York, especially Harlem, became the political capital and cultural centre of the black minority after the First World War. The NAACP was based there, with 90.000 black and white members in 1920, and Marcus Garvey's *Centre for Black Nationalism* which had up to 6 million members in 1923. But all this potential could not achieve political power, because white politicians did not consider they needed black votes to win local, state or federal elections, and even if they had them, that they would have to fulfil their electoral promises. The solution was to obtain power through black art and culture, in the form of the Harlem Renaissance³⁸.

African-American culture was the most singular element of American culture, which for the first time, after World War One, did not feel inferior to that of Europe. The «New Negro» who emerged from the war returned from Europe emphasising his American-ness and cultural superiority over thousands of recent immigrants in the big cities. They, like the English, were native and had arrived before the other minorities, but their political impotence led them to see art as the only possible means of suffrage. The first step in this Harlem Renaissance was to restore black history, to «substitute black shame with black pride» and it continued with the discovery of a much greater black literature hitherto unknown, with black theatre and the vindication of black music and art in all its forms; gospel, ragtime, blues, jazz. It was through black music that the possibilities of fame and social ascent were at their greatest, as shown by Ethel Waters, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker or the James Reese and Florence Mills bands.

8. CONCLUSION

After the relative failure of the last frontier and the end of the public lands in 1890, industrial growth in the big cities of the north and midwest became the

³⁸ DOUGLAS, 1997, pp. 318-328.

«frontier» for millions of immigrants arriving before 1921, as well as for the African-Americans of the south. This «urban frontier», maintained since World War One by the New Capitalism of mass consumer industry, was the vehicle for Americanisation and social progress for immigrants who did not conform to «American» racial and cultural models. The process was less linear and spectacular than Turner's description in his essay. Political progress was made via the party machines, and mobility was more horizontal than vertical. But in the 1920s, the development and generalization of consumer hardware, mass entertainment and culture caused a great feeling of prosperity in daily life, as well as making life in the big cities more exciting and permissive. There was space there for quick ascent through entertainment and culture or, during prohibition, through organised crime.

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